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A
S E R M O N,
PREACHED ON THE 17th OF APRIL, 1795,
TO THE
CONGREGATION
OF
PROTESTANT DISSENTERS,
IN
NORTHGATE, HALIFAX,
ON
THE DEATH OF THEIR LATE PASTOR,
THE REV. JOHN RALPH.

By William Wood.

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S E R M O N.

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YOUR FATHERS, WHERE ARE THEY? AND THE
PROPHETS, DO THEY LIVE FOR EVER?

THAT death is the certain lot of all men, is one of the most common truths that can ever engage our attention. The instances of it are so numerous and frequent, that we generally consider it as a thing of course, and instead of expressing surprize, are, on many occasions, scarcely moved to serious reflection. We perceive the progress of mankind, from infancy to childhood, from childhood to youth, from youth to manhood, and from manhood to old age; and we know what inevitably follows. *The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow.* We foresee that a single stroke must crush a frame which has long been

tottering; we hourly expect the extinction of a light which is now reduced to a dim and interrupted glimmering: and when the fatal hour at length arrives, we rather welcome the expected deliverance from a joyless state of being, than lament the loss of a companion and friend, or repine at the general destiny of the sons of men.

Nor is it only the superannuated and helpless whose death we thus contemplate with much of a tranquil indifference. So often do the full maturity of manhood, and the opening graces of youth, yield to the force of lingering disease, that in these cases also we discern and acknowledge the usual course of nature. We see the pillars of a strong constitution gradually undermined: we perceive the bloom of a countenance entirely disappear: we are well apprized that these are symptoms of approaching death; and are almost disposed to wonder that the final change is deferred so long.

And yet however little we may sometimes be affected by events which are thus almost daily occurring, in our thoughtful moments

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we can scarcely fail to draw from them instructive lessons of wisdom and religion. The first reflection that reason suggests will undoubtedly be, that what has happened to a fellow man, might have happened, and may still quickly happen to ourselves; and that therefore it behoves us *to be also ready, since we know not the day, or the hour, when our souls shall be required at our hands.*

But whether we be thus wise or not, whether or not we be thus habitually mindful of our latter end, and be thence taught to form the character which alone can raise us to a rational triumph over the fear of death, there are cases which irresistibly awaken our attention, and powerfully excite our tenderest affections. It is impossible for us to be insensible or thoughtless, when our personal acquaintance, intimate friends and valuable relations are removed from the present world. Our feelings are in the highest degree lively, when we see cut off, in the midst of their activity, such of our brethren as have been eminently useful in their own families, among their chosen connections, and to a larger circle in general society; whose

whose benevolent offices are still farther needed; and for whom, from the number of their years, a longer season of beneficial exertion might have been hoped and expected. A parent, with a numerous family of uneducated children—a minister of religion, accustomed to address the sacred doctrines of the New Testament to the delighted minds of an improving audience—a pastor confirming his instructions by his own exemplary conduct; watching over the members of a Christian Church, in sorrow and in joy, in sickness and in health, in youth and in old age; sympathizing with their distresses; rejoicing in their happiness; giving counsel to the unexperienced; and acting as a constant mediator between the rich and the poor, cannot disappear from the walks of life without causing a wide and afflicting breach in the enjoyments of many whom he leaves behind. In this sad and apparently untimely dispensation of Divine Providence, *we are bereaved, we are bereaved*, is the instinctive complaint of the desponding heart.

But

But altho' these calamitous events bring with them aggravations of sorrow peculiar to themselves, they have also the advantage of unrivalled consolations. How different would be our reflections on the death of those whom the dictates of nature impel us to love, had we reason to apprehend that they were unprepared for their final account; were we certain that they have *lived without God in the world*, and if we could not banish from our afflicted minds the painful remembrance of their uncorrected vices! In this case the anticipation of their lot in a state of just retribution, would deprive us of all support, and would urge us *to weep, and refuse to be comforted.*

But we well know, my brethren, that there is a state of character which equally fits to live or to die. It is not the short contrition of a dying bed that affords the truest solace to the grief of surviving friends; nor yet is it the rooted repentance that may *possibly* be produced by a lingering disease: it is the uniform integrity of a good life; it is the habitual virtue of the heart; it is the steady cheerfulness of principled obedience;

ence ; it is a well exercised disposition to be a blessing to others, and to find its best enjoyment in active usefulness. *Blessed is that servant, says our Divine Master, whose Lord when he cometh shall find so doing : if he shall come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, blessed is that servant.*

Do we see a conscientious regard to the offices of piety and devotion, a rational reverence of the Supreme Being, a grateful sense of his goodness, a humble dependance on his paternal care, and a patient submission to his will?—Do we perceive the temper of mind which forms the attentive relative, the sympathizing friend, and the charitable neighbour?—Do we discover the open honesty of soul which disdains the appearance of guile, and cannot dissemble its real feelings?—Do we find a cheerful but temperate enjoyment of this world's goods? Do we discern, amidst all the infirmities of flesh and sense, and amidst all the temptations of this busy world, a sincere and earnest desire to correct every inadvertent irregularity, and *to preserve a conscience void of offence before God and men?*—There, my brethren,

brethren, is *that servant*, who will assuredly be *blest at his Lord's coming*. Such a man cannot be taken by surprize. The dispositions he has formed, and the habits he has matured, are the very dispositions and habits which constitute the essence of heavenly bliss, and will prove an exhaustless spring of ever increasing delight.

Should he be preserved to the extreme of old age, should his powers be gradually weakened, and should he feel many a symptom of mortality before he sinks into the grave, he can wait with pious resignation for his final release; he can support his growing infirmities by the pleasing recollection of his past activity and usefulness; he can cheer *the days* which bring with them no new *pleasure*, by a foretaste of the joys reserved for him at *the resurrection of the just*.

Or if he should not attain to the fulness of *threescore years and ten*—if he should be taken away from the midst of his pleasing hopes and generous solitudes, he is alike prepared for a change of being: it is not

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possible that *he himself* should sustain any real loss. The world may feel the want of his benevolent exertions—the objects of his pastoral care may be deprived of a conscientious instructor, a tender minister, and encouraging example—the poor may no longer stretch out their hands, and look with a glistening eye for the wonted relief—the confiding and confided associates may bewail the friend who never failed to blend their interest with his own; who declined no labour, and refused no inconvenience to procure for them a substantial service; who anxiously rescued their reputation from every unmerited reproach; and who was never severe but from compassion for misconduct, which a transient severity was most likely to mend—his nearer connections may, and must lament the departure of the ever watchful domestic companion, who enlivened their daily meals; who bade them the affectionate good night, and the cheerful good morrow; who brightened their winter's fire, and gave new warmth and lustre to their summer's fun; who directed their family devotion, *took sweet counsel together with them*, and led them

them by the hand *to the house of God*. But *he himself* is secure from evil: *neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, can separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus his Lord*. Tho' *his flesh and his heart have failed, yet God is the strength of his heart and his portion for ever*. The souls of the righteous, says the son of Sirach, are in the hands of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seem to die, and their departure is taken for misery, and their going from us to be destruction: but they are in peace; for tho' they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality; and having been a little chastened, they shall be greatly rewarded; for God hath proved them, and found them worthy of himself.

To the pious worshipper of God, and the benevolent friend of man, there is therefore no untimely death; whether it arrive sooner or later, it is *a rest from his labours, and his works will follow him*. Who then will murmur and repine, tho' compelled to exclaim

in the language of the prophet, *Our fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever?*

These reflections, I am persuaded, will afford the truest consolation, satisfaction and joy to you, my beloved friends, the members of this christian society, under the loss of a pastor, who has long conducted your religious services; spoken to you the word of God; and come out before you sabbath after sabbath, *in the fulness of the blessing of the Gospel of Christ*. You have already applied to your late excellent friend the character which I have generally described, as a sure preparative for the hour of death. I have chosen to do it thus indirectly, from a distrust of my power over my own feelings, and not from a fear of being thought too partial to a brother in the christian ministry, with whom I have been strictly and cordially connected from my entrance into public life, whom I have seen in a great variety of situations and circumstances, whose confidence I have always had the happiness to possess, and from whom I have been

been accustomed to ask and to receive counsel, in every season of doubt and embarrassment. In the removal of such a friend I feel a loss, which, at the age of fifty, cannot be fully supplied by any new associate. The loss of those who have been united with him by dearer and more sacred ties, is still more heavy and irreparable. Nor I fear will it be easy for you to find a successor equally fitted in all respects to administer unto you in holy things. Few indeed are the men who, with so sound an understanding and so correct a judgment, possess also the warm and lively affections which rendered the labours of your deceased pastor so interesting and persuasive.

But whatever be the degree of *our* bereavement, *his* lot demands our congratulation, not our pity. For what life can be pronounced so truly happy as that of a man, who having been early trained in the habits of piety and goodness, has entered into the world with the strongest defence against its numerous temptations; has discharged his various duties with propriety and honour; has largely contributed to the
welfare

welfare of mankind; has obtained extensive esteem; and has been brought to the grave without any long intermission of active usefulness? Such a life may challenge the greatest happiness which this world can afford. And shall we grieve that it has not been continued, till, by a total decay of every power, it must have ceased to be a blessing to others, and have lost the greater part of its own enjoyment? Its best hopes cannot be destroyed, tho' it *has no longer a portion in any thing under the sun*. Its felicity here can be exceeded only by that *far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*, which is *reserved* for the faithful servants of God in a future existence.

And with respect to ourselves, when we contemplate our own loss, we are not left *to mourn as those who are without hope*. Tho' the present separation cannot but be painful, it is a separation which, unless it be our own fault, will not endure for ever. An equal discharge of the christian duties will ensure a re-union, which shall never be dissolved or interrupted, commencing with
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increased satisfaction, and leading to new delights, thro' an endless existence,

Shall we then not solicitously wish, shall we not firmly resolve to live the life of the righteous, that *our last end may be like his*. The best and sincerest expression of respect we can ever pay to our departed friend, is a steady imitation of *his faith and patience*, of his piety to God and good-will to men. It was the warmest wish of his heart to see you, the objects of his pastoral care, advancing from one degree of excellence to another, till you reached *the stature of full grown men in Christ Jesus your Lord*. And tho' his tongue has ceased to speak the tender language of lively concern for your best interests; tho' his eye no longer beams upon you the gentle rays of loving kindness and affection; tho' he no more addresses you from this pulpit as your fellow man and fellow christian, as your pastor and brother, as your guide and example in the pursuit of your *high calling*, his instructions and his virtues are not lost in the silent grave: these still survive, and *take you to record*

record this day, that he is pure from the blood of all men, having not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. By them he appeals to your consciences, and to the great Searcher of Hearts, for the integrity of his conduct in the discharge of his ministerial duty, and solemnly conjures you, as his last request, that you take heed to yourselves and to each other as members of this christian society. He calls upon you to remember that for the space of six and twenty years, he has not ceased to warn you, and has kept back nothing that was profitable to you, but has shewed you and has taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying, both to small and great, repentance towards God, and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ. Let it not be your reproach, that, like the Jews of old, you did not bear nor hearken unto the divine word, when he, whom yourselves had approved for your monitor and guide, said unto you in the name of the Lord, turn you from your evil ways, and from your evil doings. Often has he had occasion to say of those who first called him to the pastoral office in this place, Your fathers, where are they? They have disappeared from
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among you one after another, and no longer share with you in the sacred solemnities of the sabbath. And I trust that, during the time of their probation, they did not attend upon them in vain. I flatter myself that, tho' they now sleep in their peaceful sepulchres, they will finally *be partakers of a blissful resurrection unto eternal life.* It is now my painful office to add, *the Prophets, do they live for ever?* But tho' the wisdom of the Supreme Ruler has *placed the heavenly treasure in earthly vessels,* the treasure itself cannot corrupt, or be taken away. *If the Gospel be hidden, it is hidden only to them who are wilfully and obstinately lost in trespasses and sins; in whom the God of this world hath blinded their minds, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the Image of God, should shine upon them.*

But you, my beloved brethren, have not so learned Christ; you have not so neglected or abused your religious advantages; you have not so disregarded the faithful counsels of a friend, who long performed among you the work of an Evangelist, and has now finished

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his course. His deliberate instructions and earnest intreaties still live; and I am confident will ever live in your memory, and retain their influence over your hearts. His example still appears before the eye of your minds, and beckons you to *be followers of him* in all the graces and virtues of his life. It pronounces with an eloquence which no tongue can rival: “ A life of piety and
 “ goodness is the only true wisdom: religion gives the liveliest relish to the enjoyments of youth; confers the truest
 “ dignity on the sober pursuits of manhood;
 “ and prepares alike for honourable old age,
 “ and for early death.”

And you will not be inattentive to the solemn oracle: you will choose the testimony of an approving conscience as your best portion; you will prize the favour of God above every other blessing; you will be excited, by the present dispensation of Divine Providence, to greater diligence in your christian course; you will be steady to your religious principles, will continue your present harmony and affection,

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as a part of the general assembly of the first born, whose names are written in heaven, and will follow righteousness, faith, charity, and peace with them that call upon the Lord with a pure heart.

Supported by this pleasing persuasion, I now, brethren, commend you to God, and to the word of his grace; who is able to build you up, to fill up every breach, to supply all your wants, to do for you, in this world, more than you can ask or think, and at length to give you an inheritance among them that are sanctified.

THE END.

as a part of the general policy of the day
and will follow the same line of action
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and will follow the same line of action

Supported by this pleasing persuasion,
I need not say, I am sure you will be
able to fill up every breach, to sup-
ply all your wants, to do for you, in this
world, more than you can ask or think, and
at length to give you an inheritance among
the saints in glory.

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